

Caravan to Tibet

by Deepa Aggaral, illustrated by Tapas Guha

How much for that *chutka*, boy?" the stout man asked, pointing to the brightly coloured rug displayed on the ground.

"Only twenty rupees," Deb Singh said, his broad smile reducing his slanted eyes to slits.

"Twenty! What do you think you're selling? Gold brocade? Not a paisa more than ten!"

Debu felt a sharp jab in his ribs. It was Hayat, his skinny little brother. "Remember what *Ija* said. Get a good price!"

"I know what to do!" Fourteen-year-old Debu frowned. He turned to the customer. "Kaka, give us fifteen at least."

"Done!" Debu clinched the deal with delight.

The man counted out the money and Debu handed over the rug. The boys rose. They'd managed to sell off all their rugs. Their mother had woven them on the *khadi*, a handloom. It was their main source of income since their father had disappeared on a trading expedition to Tibet, apart from the potatoes they could grow here at the summer camp at Milam, the last village on the Indo-Tibetan border in Kumaon.

The Bhotias were nomads, spending summers on the heights of Milam, the in-between season in Munsiri and winter in the low valley of Quithi.

"Debu," Hayat pulled at his coat sleeve, "I want some *mishri*." He pointed to where a trader from southern Kumaon sat, surrounded by piles of *gur*, red chillies and sugar candy.

"Later," Debu said impatiently. "We have to buy wool first for more *chutkas*."

The fair was in full swing. Apart from the Bhotias selling rugs, shawls and *pattu*, a rough tweed, and the sharp-featured Kumaonis selling trinkets and hardware and cotton cloth, there were plenty of Tibetans. Heavily built, broad-faced men with wispy plaits hanging down their backs. They had bales of wool, lumps of rock salt, turquoise and asafoetida to sell. "There!" Hayat said, his black eyes gleaming. "There's a *huniya* with wool."

"*Mitra*, what price for your wool?" Debu asked. It was the custom to call the Tibetans '*mitra*' or friend.

"Eight annas a seer," the man said, with a quizzical grin. He was a large man with a broad-brimmed





hat and a chunky ear-ring dangling from one ear.

"That's too much, *mitrā*!" Debu exclaimed. "The rate's only four annas."

The man suddenly threw back his head and laughed. Debu watched surprised—then almost gasped aloud! He stood stock-still staring at the man. Or rather, the amulet around his neck. A golden 'om', a *rudraksha* bead and two carved corals! It was just like...

"You're smart for your age, boy. I won't bargain with you," the man's sing-song voice cut into his thoughts. "How much wool do you want?"

"At least a maund," Debu replied mechanically, his eyes fixed on the amulet.

"What are you staring at?" the man frowned.

"That amulet," Debu burst out. "Where did you get it?"

"What's it to you?" the man asked gruffly.

"My father was lost in a blizzard last year, crossing the Kungri Bingri pass," Debu said. "He—he wore an amulet like that."

"Oh-h," the man's eyes widened sympathetically. "I bought it from a trader in Gartok."

"Gartok?" Hayat exclaimed, surprised. Gartok, the chief town of western Tibet was a long way from the pass.

"Can—can I look at it?" Debu asked, his heart pounding crazily. Everyone had given up his father for dead. But somehow Debu had never been able to accept it. And now this amulet—suppose it was his father's! He felt light-headed at the thought.

"All right." The man unwound the amulet and handed it to Debu. The two boys examined the corals closely. Their father had got them from Nepal. Holy words were carved on them.

Then Debu caught his breath sharply. "It is *Bauju's*!" he exclaimed breathlessly.

"Yes! Yes! It's his!" Hayat piped up.

"It is?" The Tibetan flashed a puzzled smile. "But Gartok is far from the pass. I wonder how the amulet got there?"

But Debu wasn't listening. "I knew it! I knew he was alive!" he cried, his face flushed with excitement. He shoved the amulet back into the man's hand. "I must tell my mother!" He paid him and quickly loaded his pony.

Just in time he remembered Hayat's request—with a pang because *Bauju* never refused Hayat anything. Hurriedly he bought him some *mishri* and a brightly coloured top.

As they tramped home he had sudden misgivings. Should he tell his mother? She had bravely accepted the fact that *Bauju* would never come back. Life was hard, but they'd managed somehow. Would he be raising false hopes by mentioning the amulet? But then, how could he not tell? Debu was still undecided when he got home.

Their mother was seated at her loom in the courtyard in front of their house, a long narrow structure with a sloping roof of slate. She rose eagerly, a slender figure in a flared *ghagra* and white *odhni*. Only a single coin necklace hung around her neck now. Before there had been several, reaching almost to her knees.

"*Ija, Ija!*" Hayat cried. "We sold the rugs and I got some *mishri*!"

Her face crinkled in a smile. "Clever boys," she said. "But you must be hungry."

She brought them some roasted barley flour, which the boys made into a paste with butter and devoured hungrily. Debu



In 13th century Thana, the pirates could keep all the gold, silver and jewels they robbed from ships, provided they gave the King all the horses on board.

handed her the money silently.

"What's the matter?" she asked. She'd noticed his preoccupied look.

"Ija," Debu began, then stopped. He took a deep breath and continued firmly. He had to tell her. It was important for all of them. "I—I saw *Bauju's* amulet with a *huniya*!"

"Are you sure?" She went white, her face showing disbelief.

"Yes!" Debu said excitedly. "It's *Bauju's* all right. The man said he'd bought it in Gartok."

"How did it get there?" Her voice came out in a whisper.

"I don't know!" Debu shrugged. "But don't you see? That means he survived the blizzard. That means he's alive out there."

His mother turned her face away. "I don't know what to think," she said in a choked voice.

Debu's mind was in a whirl. "Ija!" he burst out eagerly. "The trade caravan is about to leave. Can I—can I go too and look for *Bauju*?" Every year, at this time the Bhotias went to trade in the *mandis* of Tibet.

"You—go! But you're too young! Do you know how hard the journey is? No, no!" She shook her head emphatically.

"But Ija—I have to go! I must find out! And I'm used to hard journeys—you know that!"

His mother nodded. "All right," she said finally with a heavy sigh. "But I don't know if they'll take you."

"Let me ask at least!"

Early next morning he rushed to meet Kalyan Singh, the head man, who would lead the *kafila* or caravan. The July sun was strong even at that hour, the air was thin at 11,200 feet. Tall mountains, some still wearing caps of snow, surrounded the valley. The Goriganga, which rose from the

glacier near the village, wound its slender way beside the flat potato and barley fields.

Kalyan Singh, a thin man with a prematurely wrinkled face, was busy supervising the arrangements. Sacks of flour, dal and *sattu*, *gur* and *mishri*, bales of cloth lay around—provisions for the journey and goods to trade with the Tibetans.

"*Pranam*, Kaka," Debu began, then stopped.

"What do you want, Debu?" Kalyan Singh asked kindly. Since his father's disappearance, everyone in the small community had considered it their responsibility to help them. That way they'd been lucky.

"Kaka, I want to join the caravan. I want to go to *Huniya Dosh* and search for my father."

Kalyan Singh looked stunned.

"Son," he said gently after a while, "you know your father Dharam Singh was lost in the blizzard. It's not likely he survived."

"Yes, Kaka," Debu said. "But," he paused dramatically, "I have proof that he's alive. I saw his amulet with a *huniya* yesterday!"

"What? No, no, no!" Kalyan Singh shook his head unconvinced. "You're mistaken. No one could have lived through that storm on his own. We were lucky to make it."

Debu's mouth set stubbornly. "It is his amulet, Kaka. I'm sure he's alive. You must take me."

"Take you where?" A vaguely familiar voice sounded in his ear.

Debu whirled. It was the Tibetan. "Take me with the car-





avan," Debu said, "to find my father! See!" He pointed to the amulet. "That's my father's."

Kalyan Singh peered at the amulet. "Where did you get that from, Sonam Darka?"

"A man at Gartok." He began to take it off. "Keep it, son."

"No, no," Debu protested. "You keep it. You bought it. For me it's enough to have seen it. Now will you take me, Kaka?"

"Take him, Kalyan Singh," Sonam said. "Let him find out for himself about his father."

"But your mother?" Kalyan Singh asked doubtfully.

"She's agreed," Debu said. "Hayat's there, so she won't be alone. And everyone helps."

Kalyan Singh was silent for a while. "All right," he said, rather reluctantly.

"Thank you, Kaka," Debu said, overjoyed. "I'll do whatever work you want me to."

"We leave tomorrow," Kalyan Singh said shortly. "Be ready in time." Debu rushed off to tell his mother.

The caravan left early the next day—a cavalcade of yaks, jobos, sheep and ponies. The yaks and jobos—a cross between a yak and a cow, were heavily laden with goods. So were the pack sheep which had come with the Tibetans. The men rode the ponies. Many carried guns, for the way was infested with robbers.

"Go with my blessings, son," Debu's mother embraced him sadly. Hayat suddenly took out his top and placed it in Debu's coat pocket—a parting gift!

The road wound steeply through the shrubby junipers and rhododendrons. Mount Trishuli loomed before them. The air grew

rarer and Debu felt his breath labouring.

"Tired, Debu?" Sonam Darka rode up alongside. He took out a handful of *gurpatri*—roasted suji mixed with dried fruit and *gur*. It was a welcome snack!

In the evening they reached Dung, where they camped for the night. "Tomorrow we cross the passes, if there's no rain," Kalyan Singh said, as they sat around the fire drinking tea and eating the rotis they had brought with them. "Rain is dangerous," he said shortly, then lapsed into a brooding silence.

"Kaka," Debu asked hesitantly. "What was it like—that blizzard?" He had heard the story before, but he'd been in a state of shock at that time so it had never really penetrated. But now as he retraced his father's steps he wanted to know it all.

Kalyan Singh let out a deep breath. "I've never faced anything like it before," he said, "though I've been crossing these passes for twenty-five years." He gazed into the crackling fire. "The sky was cloudy that morning. We should have waited another day, but we were already late returning. And there was the risk that the passes would get blocked if it snowed, and we'd be stranded. Either way the odds were against us. So we decided to take the chance."

"Who can foretell the vagaries of the weather?" Sonam Darka said as he drew deeply on his hookah. "I've seen blizzards blow up on a clear day, when you least expect them."

"It began to snow when we were half-way up to Kungri Bingri. By the time we got to the pass it had worsened. We could hardly see a foot ahead of us." He paused. "Your father had been ill. It was



Marco Polo found that soldiers in south India believed that ox-hair would protect them from danger. Horsemen tied it to their horse's mane and infantrymen to their shields.

harder for him to keep up. We never even noticed when he got left behind, we were too involved in our own struggle."

Debu's eyes blurred. He could almost see it all, his father, normally tough and hardy, being buffeted by the snows in his weakened state. Had he managed to make it? Then the firelight glinted on the golden 'om' around Sonam Darka's neck and his heart lightened. The amulet, a sign of hope!

Sparks blew up as someone threw a few twigs on the fire. "We found a cave, took shelter under an overhanging rock," Kalyan Singh continued, "and huddled close to the animals for warmth, till the worst was over. When we started again we realised that your father was missing. But we couldn't afford to go back and search. We had to cross the other two passes by the evening."

"That's the worst thing about this trail," Sonam Darka said. "You have to cross all three passes in one day. It's impossible to camp in between."

"But," Debu said eagerly, "he did manage to survive and even reach Gartok." Kalyan Singh threw a sceptical glance at Sonam Darka. But Debu did not care. He knew that Bauju was alive and that he'd find him. Just let him reach Gartok!

Get up, Debu." It was Sonam Darka waking him. The sky was still dark and a biting wind blew. Sonam had brought him tea in his own silver-lined wooden bowl. Debu gulped it gratefully.

The ascent began. An ascent so steep that Debu could never have imagined it, though his father had described it often. All three passes—Unta Dhura,

Jayanti Dhura and Kungri Bingri were at an average height of 18,000 feet. They climbed up, crossed the first pass, then down again, then up.

A skittering sound startled Debu and a sudden jerk! His pony was slipping, sliding down the rubble-strewn path! Chill fear knotted his stomach. He didn't want to fall and get hurt. How would he complete his quest! Instinctively he clung to the pony.

"Get off, Debu!" Sonam shouted as the hill pony dug in its heels and regained its footing.

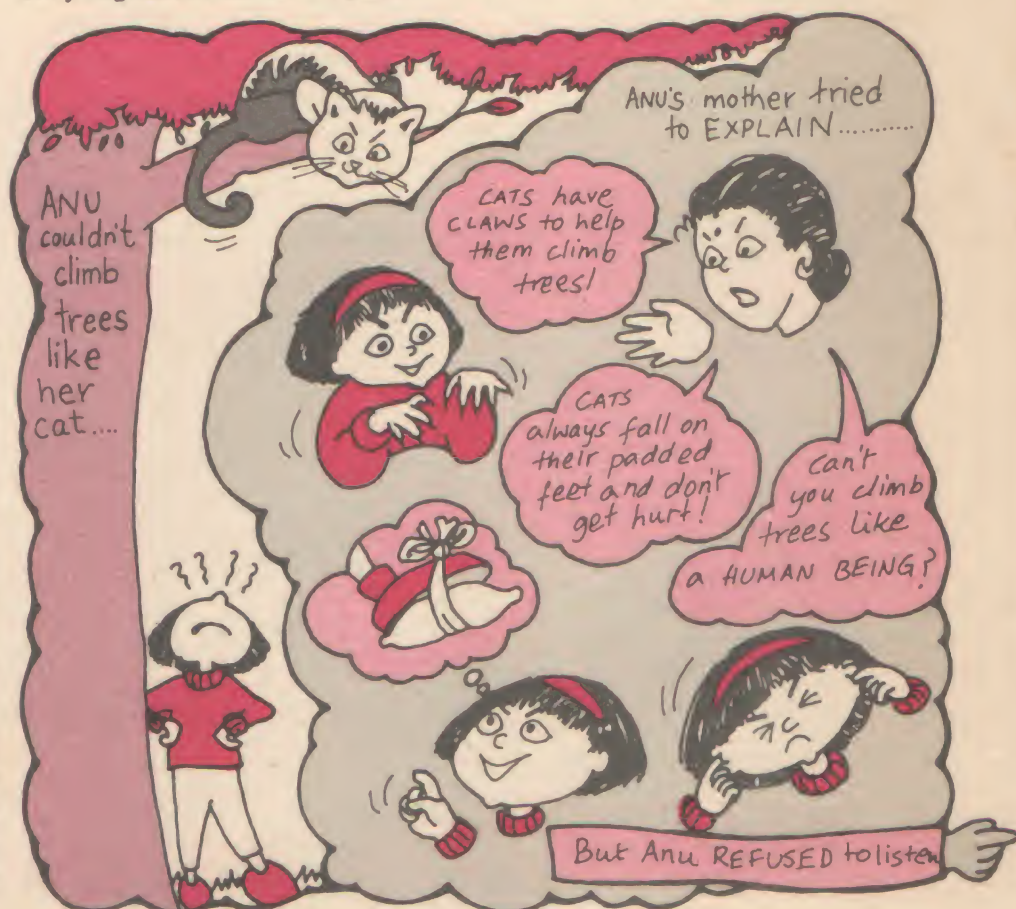
Carefully, Debu dismounted. Everyone else had got off too. They repeated this performance every time the climb was too stiff or the ground slushy with melted snow. But the foul-tempered yaks and jobos faced no problems. They negotiated the snowy paths

and tricky climbs with ease.

"This is where we took refuge," Kalyan Singh said. He pointed to a huge rock jutting out of the mountainside, with a cave behind it. A natural shelter.

Debu tried to imagine the blizzard. The sky was clear that day with hardly a few puffs of cloud. But the wind was freezing. It chilled him even through his sheepskin coat and woollen churidars. What was it like that other day with the blinding white-out obscuring all?

Eagerly he looked around as they trudged on. God knows what he hoped to find. Some sign, some clue? Some possible place where Bauju could have sheltered? There didn't seem to be any. Finally they crossed the last pass, the fateful one. A low wall of stones marked the Indian bound-



ary. Now they were in Tibet.

"There, there's Kang Rim-pochhe, Holy Kailash!" Sonam Darka exclaimed. But Debu was so preoccupied that he barely glanced absent-mindedly at the fabled peak.

Close by was a large *laptche* or a heap of stones, hung with a row of cloth flags, a religious monument as well as a guide to travellers. Sonam Darka added a stone, and bowed reverently. Then, one by one, so did the others.

As they trotted down the precipitous descent to Chirchin, their night camp, Debu noticed caves yawning out of the mountainside. "Could *Bauju* have sheltered here?" he thought with a quick surge of excitement.

"A holy man used to live here," Sonam Darka said, noticing his interest. "He doesn't seem to be here today."

Debu felt a further lift. There was a chance—*Bauju* might have made it to these caves! Elated, he burst into a snatch of song, making Sonam Darka smile. He too had the habit of humming, repeating mantras and turning his prayer wheel as they went along.

On the eighth day they reached Gyanima Mandi. "This is the biggest trade mart of western Tibet," Sonam Darka said. "You can get almost anything here."

"I can well believe it," Debu said, looking at the spreading expanse of tents where Bhotias from various districts rubbed shoulders with men from Ladakh, Nepal, Kulu and Tibet. "How far is it to Gartok?" he asked.

"Another march of eight to ten days," Sonam Darka replied.

They left the next day, while some of the traders stayed back. They travelled along the *jong-lan*, the great road that led to Lhasa. All around was the barren

table-land. Only the frequent *laptches* marked the trail and prevented them from losing their way. They stayed at resting places, called *tasams*, every twenty to seventy miles—either houses made of sun-dried brick or tents providing shelter to weary travellers.

Gartok was just a couple of days away when they camped at a small settlement. Close by was a *gompa* or monastery.

"Let's pay our respects to the Lama," Sonam Darka said when they were all settled.

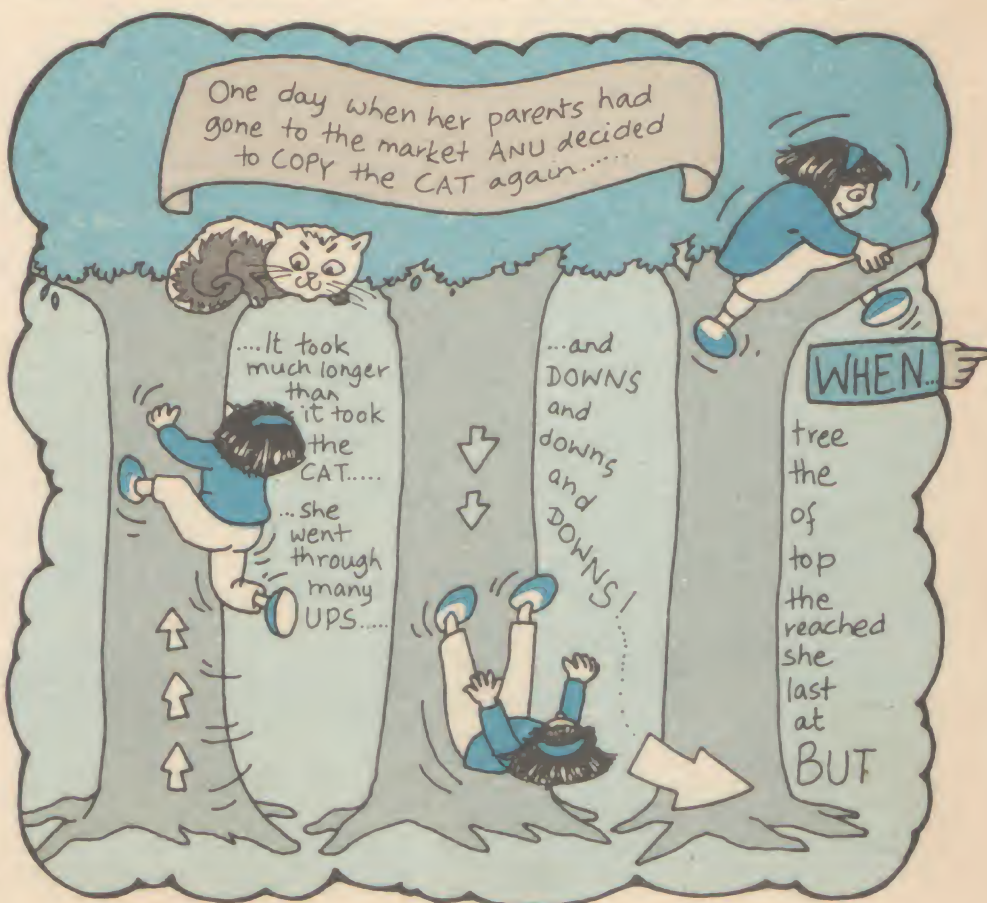
The monastery, a cluster of buildings surrounded by a wall, clung to the slope of a hill. Two fierce images guarded the gates. Debu entered the *gompa* with

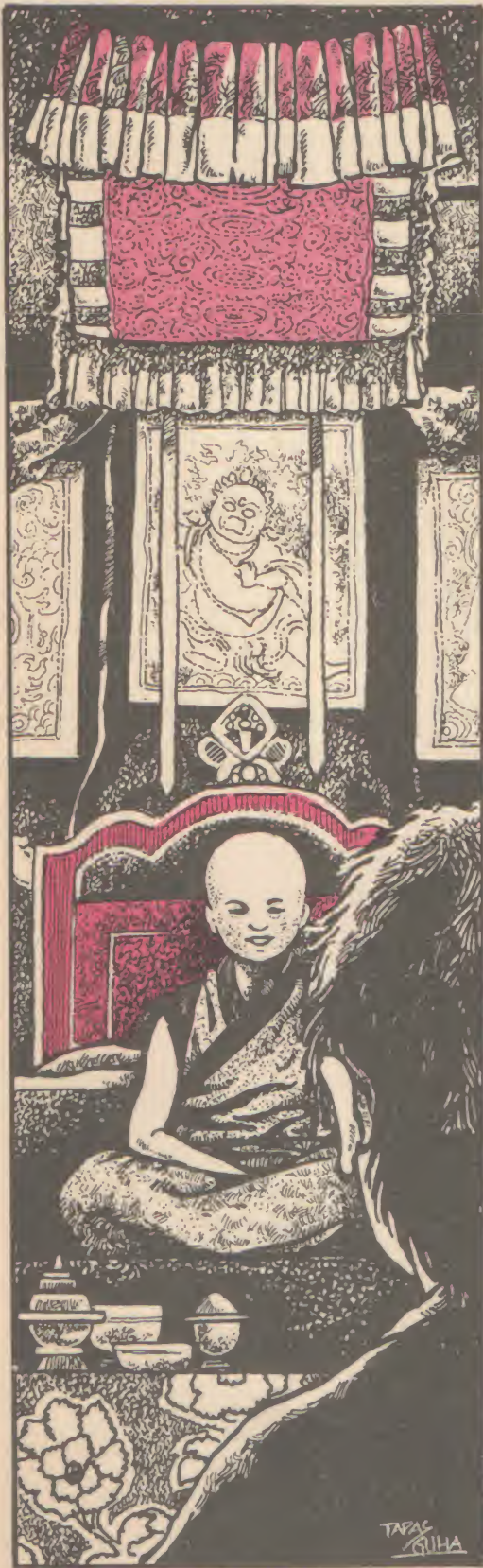
mingled hope and curiosity. The Lama was supposed to be all-knowing. Would he be able to tell him something about his father?

He looked about him. The roofs were highly ornamented with gilded wooden structures. They also had prayer cylinders, flags and yaks' tails placed here and there. But when they finally met the Lama he got a real shock. The yellow-clad figure seated on the gilded throne was a boy younger than himself!

They all bowed low most respectfully. Debu did too, and as he bent, the top in his pocket rolled out somehow. The Lama's bright black eyes glittered suddenly. He muttered something to his cup bearer, a grave heavy-lidded man. Debu heard it.

Immediately he picked up the top and offered it to the Lama,





who flashed him a delighted smile. They all presented strips of silk, dried fruit and sweets. Then the Lama blessed them, very seriously, and another monk placed strips of silk around their necks. From a silver kettle he poured tea into the cups they carried in their waist bags. Then they returned to their camp.

Debu was just about to mount his pony the next morning, when loud hoof beats thundered in his ears. "Stop!" cried the horseman, as he reined up with a jerk.

Debu gazed at him bewildered. "What's the matter?" Sonam Darka asked.

"You all can go," the man said. "But the Lama wants *him* back." He gestured towards Debu. Debu was stunned.

"But I can't!" he cried. "How can I stay!"

The man frowned ominously. "The Lama wants it."

Kalyan Singh looked troubled. Sonam Darka said gently in a low tone, "You must agree. You mustn't displease the Lama."

Kalyan Singh sighed. "You'll have to, son. We traders are dependent on their goodwill. If we displease the Lama, who knows what may happen?"

Debu's heart plummeted. How could he stay at the monastery and abandon his quest?

"We'll search for your father in Gartok," Sonam Darka said, placing an arm around his shoulder. "Don't worry, son, everything will turn out all right."

"Yes, Debu," Kalyan Singh added. "We'll find out about him and take you back on our return journey."

Dejectedly, Debu gathered up his belongings and followed the horseman on his pony. As they approached the monastery, the sound of cymbals and the long

Tibetan trumpets came to his ears, along with the beating of drums and the chanting of '*Om mani padme hum*'. The monks were at their prayers.

"Why did this have to happen to me?" Debu thought clenching his fists impatiently, as he waited in the large entrance hall. It was a dark room with small windows dimly lit with flickering butter lamps. Now he would never find *Bauju*! Sonam Darka and the amulet had been his lead, and he had lost sight of both. True, Sonam and Kalyan Singh had promised to search, but something told him that they really did not believe his father was alive. Their search would be perfunctory at best.

The smell of incense and burning butter almost suffocated him. Debu wanted to turn back and run, but the man had taken his pony away, God knows where. 'Is my quest going to end here—hopelessly?' he thought, almost in despair, as the demon faces and skulls on the tantric tankhas stared down at him menacingly.

Then his eye fell on a huge image of the Buddha set in an alcove. How serene that face was! All at once he felt a sense of calm. It would be all right. He would find a way. Yes, somehow he'd escape! So when the summons came, he faced the Lama calmly, without any hostile feelings. A broad smile split the Lama's round, rosy face when he saw Debu. "Sit," he commanded in a fluty voice.

The tall man in satin robes near him—his father, Debu discovered later, said, "Boy, the *skushog* wishes to make you his special friend."

"I am honoured," Debu said, bowing. He really didn't know how to behave. The Lama wanted to be his friend. But he was sup-



'Huge, fine pearls of excellent quality' were gathered from the seas near Maabar province, south India, in Marco Polo's time. Pearl fishers dived and brought up oysters in string bags.

posed to be a respected religious head, a *skushog*, the reincarnation of a former Lama. How was Debu supposed to treat him?

Still smiling mischievously, the little Lama produced the top. "What do you do with this?"

Debu couldn't help smiling too. Expertly he spun the top. The Lama clapped with delight, then tried it for himself.

"This is fun!" he chortled. "Do you know how to play with these?" He produced a set of marbles made of rounded stones. Debu nodded, so the Lama led him out to the courtyard to play.

Outside, Debu glanced round surreptitiously. Where had they kept the pony? If only he could find out! The caravan could not have gone too far. There was a chance he could catch up still.

His opportunity came at noon, when Lobsang's (the Lama's real name) father came to fetch him.

"It's time for your prayers," he said.

"I'll be back soon," Lobsang told Debu, and left.

rooms were so ill-lit. The monk passed without even glancing in his direction!

He tiptoed to the door through which the monk had entered. Beyond it was a set of ladder-like stairs that led down and to the outside! Debu scrambled down, then stopped to take stock of his surroundings. A gust of wind brought him a whiff of horse dung. He was close!

Then he saw them, the out-houses to his left. He ran across, ducked through a low doorway and found himself there—in the monastery's stables!

It was easy to locate his shaggy grey pony, which nuzzled him happily. Then his eyes quickly scanned the walls for his wooden saddle. He was just taking it down, when the sound of a heavy footstep made him freeze! He

heard a muttered oath and a hard hand fell on his shoulder.

"What are you doing here?" It was the same man who'd brought him to the *gompa*. "Not trying to run away?" His eyes narrowed shrewdly. He probably remembered Debu's unwillingness to come in the first place.

Lobsang looked sad as Debu was led before him, flushed and defiant. "I thought you liked being my friend," he said.

As Debu met his gentle black gaze, a thought sprang into his mind. Surely Lobsang would understand? So he blurted it all out, how his father had got lost in the blizzard, the discovery of the amulet, and his quest.

A sudden exclamation made him turn around. It was one of the monks. "A trader lost in the blizzard?" Debu nodded eagerly.

As soon as he was alone, Debu looked around eagerly. Where could the stables be? Probably in the lower part of the monastery. A door led out from a side wall in the courtyard. That would be the best bet. But it led into a small, dark room. Debu paused, confused. Was there a way out? The monastery wasn't very large, but it was like a maze. Nervously he searched for a door, then a sound made him stop in his tracks. Someone was humming under his breath—probably a monk who was late for his prayers. Debu held his breath and flattened himself against the wall, thankful the





"I heard something of a man being saved by a lama from Tircchen *gompa*," the monk said, frowning. "From somewhere near the Kungri Bingri Pass..."

"You did!" Debu leapt up.

"Yes," the monk said. "I'm sure I did. The lama had been meditating in one of those caves, and he found the man half dead."

"Where can I find that lama?"

Debu asked breathlessly.

Tircchen *gompa* is not far from here," Lobsang said. "I'll send you there with an escort."

"Thank you! Oh, it would be wonderful if I could find my father!" Debu cried, overjoyed.

The man cleared his throat. Debu looked around questioningly. "I—I'm not sure if the man survived," the monk said, his eyes glancing away from Debu. "He was very, very ill."

Debu's excitement fled. Was he hanging on to false hope? "In any case," he said slowly. "I must find out."

Lobsang nodded sympathetically, his childish face full of an understanding beyond his years.

Debu left with an escort, as Lobsang promised. One was the man who'd brought him to the monastery, a glum taciturn fellow. There were two others and a yak laden with provisions. The trail was dreary, but Debu's hopes buoyed him up. At night they camped by the roadside. There was no settlement nearby.

Suddenly in the middle of the night, Debu awoke. Something was pressing down on him something heavy, blanketing, suffocating! He struggled to throw it off. Then he heard a peculiar high pitched cry, "Ullu-ullu, ullu-uul!" He froze with terror. He knew

what that cry meant, *Bauju* had told him. Robbers!

What was he to do? They had cut the tent ropes—it was their way to prevent their victims resisting. But he had to escape! Fighting the feeling of suffocation, he tried to crawl out. He could hear horses whinnying, guns going off, along with the robbers' unnerving cries.

When he emerged into the bright starlight, he noticed a couple of horses galloping away, leaving him behind.

Someone seized him roughly. He found himself staring into a wild face, narrow eyes, a cruel mouth, framed by a head of shaggy hair. "It's a boy!" the man exclaimed, thrusting him away so hard that he fell to the ground.

"This is all there is." One of the men led the yak forward.

The wild man swore. "Pau-pers!" he said disgustedly. He looked at Debu who was picking himself up.

"Let's finish him off," suggested one of the robbers, a short man with a pinched face. "He's no use to us."

"No, wait," said the wild looking man. From his tone of command Debu could sense that he was in charge. He pulled roughly at the gold rings Debu wore in his ears. "He's a Bhotia," he said grinning evilly. "Son of one of the traders. Maybe we can gain something from him!"

A bitter-cold dawn was breaking as Debu arrived at the robbers' camp. He was grateful for the butter tea and the small portion of *sattu* they gave him. His bones ached from their rough treatment, his ears felt sore. "So boy," the robber chief said gulping down his cup of *chang*, the Tibetan beer. "Where's your father trading? Gyanima Gartok?"

Pearls are very pretty but it takes an oyster at least seven years to make one!



"Nowhere," Debu replied, trying to face him bravely.

"Don't try to get clever with me!" The robber chief growled.

Debu gulped. Haltingly he repeated his story.

"No father." The robber chief was furious. "A real beggar we've picked up!"

"I told you to finish him off."

"Quiet!" The chief thundered. "I don't kill children. Well boy, since you're no good for ransom, you'll have to work for your keep, till we decide what to do with you."

The whole day Debu was on the run. He brewed their tea, boiled their soup and filled their cups with *chang*, replenished their hookahs on demand. The robbers were not a large gang. That's why they had attacked their small party. They'd been having bad luck lately, as he made out from the snatches of conversation he overheard. Their loot had been limited and their victims had often resisted. Also, they had lost several members of their gang.

"Let's raid Thok Jalong," he heard the chief say that evening.

"Too far," the short man objected. "And there aren't enough of us."

"It's worth the risk," the chief insisted. "A few nuggets of gold will go a long way."

Thok Jalong was a gold-field several days' march from the camp. Debu was forced to accompany them. Being short of men, the robbers had decided to make him join their band. This raid would be his initiation.

It was a terrible journey. The weather was dismal and the landscape as grim as Debu's mood. "Will I ever find my father?" he wondered as he rode along, wearily. First the Lama had delayed

him, now the robbers. Could anyone have worse luck? How could he escape? He didn't even know how far he was from Gartok.

They crossed a pass and struggled on to reach a desolate plain. This was their destination. Thok Jalong stood at an altitude of 16,000 feet. Debu had heard of these gold mines. His mother even had ear-rings, a *guloband* or choker and bracelets made from Tibetan gold. So in spite of his depression Debu couldn't help gazing curiously at the settlement of black yak hair tents.

They attacked that very night. Debu's heart thudded painfully as they took out the horses. He'd try and escape during the raid!

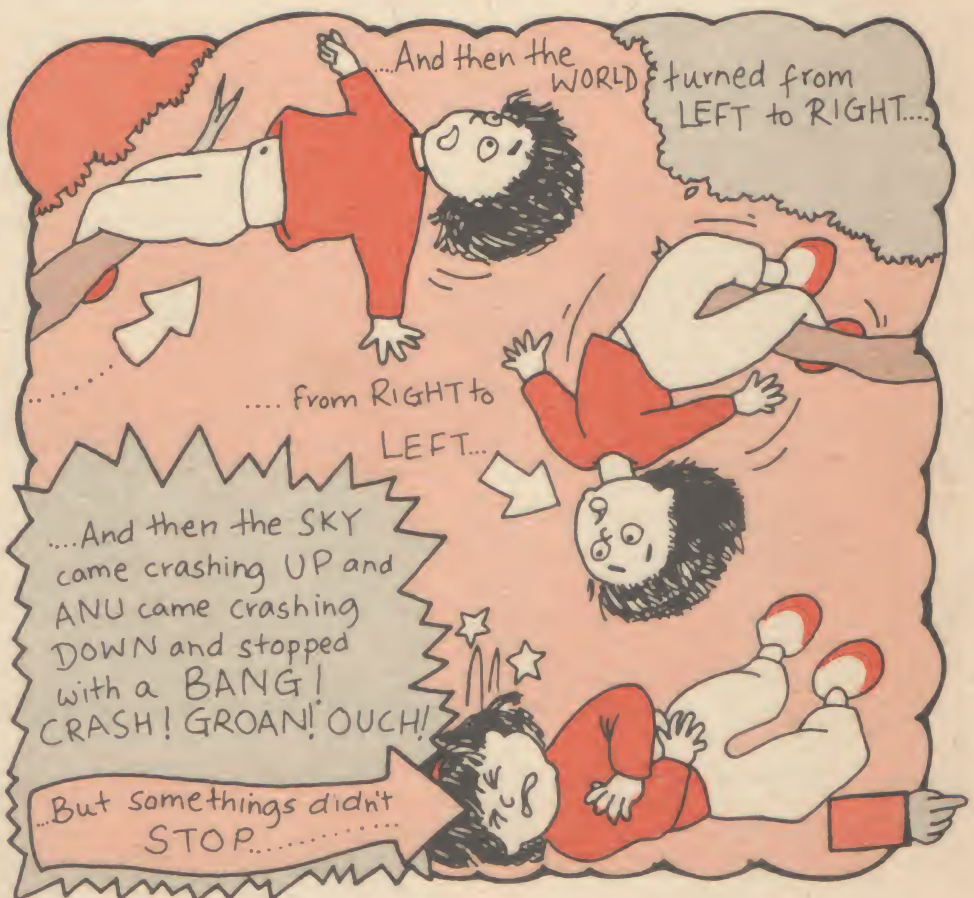
His hopes vanished when he was forced to mount behind one of the men, tied securely so he


couldn't get away. The robbers were taking no chances.

Stealthily, they approached a cluster of huts somewhat away from the rest. Two men dismounted. They crept towards the tents silently, to cut down the ropes, and surprise the miners. Barely had they reached when a dog's loud bark rang out then another and another!

"Quick!" shouted the chief. "Try to get some horses at least." As the night came alive with the deep, hoarse barks of the Tibetan mastiffs, he wheeled towards a large tent. The restless tramp of horses' hooves and neighing sounds came from it.

Shots rang out from the tents. The robbers fired back. Shouts and yells mingled with the pounding of hooves and the animals' cries. Debu was carried along





Marco Polo in Tibet

Do you dream of travelling half-way across the world? Marco Polo, a Venetian merchant's son, did just that—without planes or trains! In 1271 he set out with his father and uncle from Italy to the court of Kublai Khan, ruler of China. Marco Polo later told his fantastic story to a writer, so we have his own record of what he saw. His 12th century views may not be like your 20th century ones! But his accounts are detailed and vivid as a painting, like this one of the mysterious province of Tibet...

...For twenty days the traveller must pass through uninhabited villages where roaming lions, bears and lynxes make the journey very dangerous. Merchants travelling through these regions use very large canes growing here to defend themselves... At night, travellers make a huge pile of these green canes which they then throw onto a wood fire. As they burn they begin to twist and split in half, making a loud crackling noise and occasionally exploding. This terrifies the wild animals... Furthermore, they... will find habitations where they can stock up only every third or fourth day if they are lucky.

... Finally... the traveller reaches houses and castles built on mountain slopes. The people... live by hunting and on the fruits of the land, and they also keep sheep. There are so many musk deer in these parts that their scent can be smelt throughout the province. These... men... have neither coins nor paper money. Salt is their currency.

... In several parts there are lakes, rivers and mountains with vast quantities of gold dust... Camel hair is woven here as are silk and cloth of gold. Spices which are quite unknown to us grow in Tibet. They own mastiffs as large as donkeys which are trained to hunt every type of animal...

—Vatsala Kaul

Excerpt from *The Travels of Marco Polo*
—A modern translation by Teresa Waugh

helplessly, all trussed up as he was. He saw the robbers leading some horses away....

Zing! Something whistled past his ear. He felt a tremendous jerk and found himself flying off the horse. Thud! he hit the ground hard. The last thing he heard was a cry of pain...

When he came to, he found himself lying in a tent. Where was he? With the robbers? His head

throbbed painfully. Gingerly he touched it. There was a cloth tied around it—it felt like silk. The robbers wouldn't bandage his head with silk! Beneath him was the woolly feel of an animal skin. A blanket covered him. Then he heard a soft step and a woman's voice. The first he'd heard after a long time. "Are you awake?" He found himself looking into a round, smiling face.

"Yes," he managed to croak.
"All right. Don't talk too much, you're hurt. Here, drink this." She lifted his head and put a bowl to his lips. It was a strange-testing brew, neither bitter nor sweet. Debu gulped it quickly and sank down again.

When he awoke the next time his head ached less.
"What were you doing with the robbers?" the woman asked. She had a cheerful face with hair plaited into numerous braids, and she wore necklaces of large coral gold beads. "We were surprised to find you tied to the one who got shot. Why did they do it?"

"He was shot?" Debu gasped.
"I had a lucky escape." He was silent for a while. Then he told her his story.

"Ah, poor boy," she said kindly. "I'm Dolma. My husband works in the gold-fields. You can stay here as long as you wish." She patted his hand.

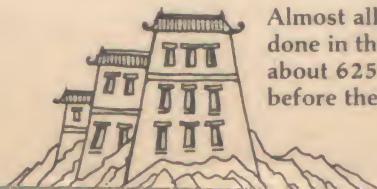
But there was only one thing on Debu's mind. "How can I get to Gartok?" he asked eagerly.

"Wait till you're better," she said. "Caravans leave regularly from here."

Debu couldn't bear to wait. The very next morning, he decided to find out for himself. He climbed out of the strange dwelling—a sort of pit dug in the ground with a tent pitched on top. The freezing wind outside hit him fiercely. So that's why the miners lived underground! But it cleared his head somewhat.

The goldminers were at work, singing in chorus. They were scooping up the soil in baskets, placing it on cloth sieves, then washing it with water from the streams nearby. The mud got

Almost all artistic work in Tibet was done in the monasteries. There were about 6259 monasteries in Tibet before the Chinese takeover in 1959.



carried away, the gold nuggets were left behind.

He saw something moving in the distance. A long line of yaks laden with goods, ponies and men—the caravan!

Debu gasped. The caravan was leaving! God knew when the next one would go. He had to join it! He rushed forward, trying to leap over the pits in his way, avoiding the men at work. Somehow he had to catch up!

An uneven mound of hard earth caught his toe, and he fell into one of the shallow pits, all the breath knocked out of him.

A strong arm helped him up and dusted him down. "Hey! Where do you think you're going? You nearly buried me!" The Tibetan miner paused and looked curiously at Debu. "You're a Bhotia boy, aren't you? How in the Lord's name did you get to this god-forsaken place?"

Debu briefly told him. "Looking for your father, eh? Well, there are a few Bhotias here. They may know something, though we're pretty far from Gartok."

The caravan was in any case almost out of sight, and Debu was shaken and cold. It was stupid of him to rush off without proper preparation. He drew his coat more closely about him, tucked in his chin, thanked the miner, and set off to the western edge of the gold-fields. He would be systematic, and cover every one of the diggings, however long it took. It was better than sitting wasting his time waiting perhaps for days, till the next caravan left.

That first day was full of disappointments. He found only one Bhotia, a strange, wild fellow, who was unhelpful, and got along neither with his Tibetan workmates nor with anyone else, as far as Debu could tell. The miners

had to work hard to keep from freezing and had little time for a talkative boy.

That night Dolma sensed his despair and made him eat extra soup and bread. "You need it to keep your strength up," she smiled. "Why don't you rest a bit? There's not much point tramping around in the cold all day."

Debu appreciated her kindness, but couldn't take her advice. He was restless and unhappy. Early next morning he trudged to the northern limits of the camp. A group of roughly dressed miners were already at work, some inside the pits digging, and a couple up on the surface shovelling away the earth through the sieves.

"Mitra," Debu called to one of them. "Do you know of any Bhotias working out here? I'm seeking news of ..."

"Who wants to know about Bhotias?" A voice came out of the pit, and then a sturdy, weather-beaten figure.

"BAUJU!" Debu cried, leaping at his father and almost tumbling both of them into the pit.

"Debu, Debu!" His father hugged him and looked at him, bewildered. "How did you..."

"Get here? It's a long story, Bauju. Can we go somewhere quiet—and warm?"

Later, he sat in Bauju's tent and told him all his adventures. "You took a big risk," his father said, "but I'm proud of you."

"How did you get here?" Debu asked. Softly he said, "Everyone gave you up for lost. Only I could never accept it."

His father squeezed his arm. "I don't blame them," he said. "It was a terrible storm."



"How did you escape?"

"Well," he said with a sigh. "I don't know when exactly I got separated from the others. It was impossible to see anything. The wind was so fierce, the snow blinding. It was all I could do to stay on my feet." His face showed how bitter the memory was. "I must have turned around the wrong way in the white-out. Suddenly I found myself going downhill—but I just didn't know where I was. And then—I saw a cave! Somehow I managed to stagger inside!"

"The caves near Chirchin!" Debu exclaimed.

"The very same. I collapsed as I entered. Luckily there was a lama there. He saved my life. Alone I'd never have survived, I had taken such a battering."

"He was the one who took you to his monastery?" Debu asked.

"Yes. Snow had blocked the passes, so there was no way I could have returned home."

"But the amulet—" Debu asked. "When did you sell that?"

"When I recovered I took leave of the lama and went to Gartok. But I ran short of money. All my goods had been lost in the storm. I had to sell my amulet, even borrow money. I decided to come and work in the gold-fields to make good my losses. I sent a message through a trader that I'd be away for a season. Now I've made my profit in gold, and was soon planning to start for home."

"We never got the news." Debu looked sad, remembering his mother's grief, and Hayat's. Suddenly he said, "I wish we could have joined the caravan. The others must be ready to go back to Milam any day."

"We can try and catch up," his father replied. "I'll arrange for horses and supplies."

They left after thanking kind-hearted Dolma. By nightfall they had reached a large inn. As Debu was checking that the horses were stabled properly, a heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

"Debu, what are you doing here?" It was Sonam Darka.

"Sonam!" Debu was thrilled. He clutched his arm. "I've found my *Bauju*."

"You have!" Just then Debu's father appeared.

"*Bauju*, this is Sonam," Debu cried. "The man with the amulet. How did you get here?"

"At Gartok I discovered that Dharam Singh had gone to the gold-fields. So I decided to go there and search, since I'd promised you. But you found him before me."

"Oh, Sonam!" Debu's eyes misted over. How could he have ever thought Sonam wouldn't search whole-heartedly?

"Here, here's your amulet, *mitra*," Sonam said.

"No!" Dharam Singh laid a hand on his arm. "Keep it. It's lucky—it led Debu to me."

"The caravan to Milam leaves Gartok in another three days," Sonam said. "You might just catch up."

"Perfect!" Debu cried. "But, Sonam, when will we see you?"

"I'll be in Milam next year to trade as usual."

"I have something to ask," Debu's father said hesitantly. "Will you be my *mitra*, my representative here? My old partner died last year, and I haven't replaced him." The Bhotia traders generally had a partner in Tibet.

"Certainly, friend," Sonam replied, clasping his hand. And Debu felt he couldn't imagine anything better! □

Rhyme



Two little Boys

Two little boys
Means lots of noise

One little boy
Can be controlled.
One little boy
Will do as he's told.
One little boy
Daren't be too bold

But two little boys
Means lots of noise

Two little boys
Scream and shout
Wildly, madly,
They dash about
Over the furniture
In and out.

Two little boys
Means lots of noise

